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ABSTRACT

Remarks are made on the matter of who should be held accountable for students learning to read and write. It is stated that ways are needed to restructure schools so that teachers may reasonably be held responsible for seeing that all clinically normal students are able to read and write with at least minimal competence. It is believed that this restructuring of the present school system should result in small, locally controlled school districts, such that the teacher can know the students and be accessible to their parents. These should be so administered that teachers are given the final responsibility for all professional decisions. Such a teacher-run school would be accountable to the students and their parents, and to its funding authority only for demonstrating it is meeting the wishes of its clients and handling its funds in a legal manner. Prior to the reform of the present educational system, it is pointed out that everyone in a school is accountable for helping children learn to read and write. (DB)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGE: WHO SHOULD BE ACCOUNTABLE?

By James Hoetker*

Some years ago, when Charley Brown discovered he had a baby sister named Sally, he was very proud and happy about it — until Lucy started trying to stir up some sibling rivalry. "You think your parents are going to split their affections 50–50," Lucy warned Charley in one classic strip, "but that's not necessarily so. It might be 51–49. Or even 60–40." After Lucy had tri-

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umphantly departed, poor Charley marvels, "I had no idea family life was so mathematical."

Most English teachers had no idea that education was so mathematical, either, until some bureaucratic fussbudget demanded to know how much it costs to produce one unit of 85% appreciation of *Macbeth*. But hardly anyone laughs at such demands, although it is surely as absurd to talk about teachers being held accountable for quantities and percentages of appreciation as it is to talk about percentages of parental affection.

Now, I do not want to try to take up the whole matter of accountability, voucher plans, performance contracting, and educational systems approaches; I have my say on these matters in a volume NCTE is preparing for publication early next year. (It is tentatively entitled *Systems, Systems Approaches, and the Teacher*. Also in preparation is *Accountability and the Teacher of English*, edited by Henry Maloney; and already available is *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English*, edited by John Maxwell and Anthony Tovatt.)

I just want to make a few remarks on the matter of *who* should be held accountable for students learning to read and write.

Accountability, roughly, is the idea that everyone in a school system should be held accountable for doing the job the taxpayers are paying him to do. In the abstract, it is indisputable that one should not be rewarded indefinitely for only pretending to do his job or for doing another job completely. But the problem is that there is no agreement at all about such things as who should be responsible for what to whom.

Logical analysis of the discourse on the subject of accountability would, I believe, reveal that both its advocates and opponents are usually talking literal nonsense, spinning out webs of words that cannot be tied down to real-world referents. Systems analysts, scientific managers, and behavioral objectivists who urge that teachers must be held accountable for the attainments of their students are operating on the blindest kind of faith, ignoring the facts that they lack procedures for objectively validating educational goals, lack valid and reliable measures for describing most educational outcomes, and lack empirical evidence of the superiority (or even the feasibility) of systems approaches to the management of school learning.

Humanistic opponents of accountability in English education, on the other hand, while gleefully seizing on the theoretical and practical shortcoming of existing systems technologies, choose to ignore the monumental fact that, from the point of view of mil-

lions of students who reach school-leaving age as semiliterates or even functional illiterates, language teaching has been a massive and increasingly expensive failure. And they choose to ignore the equally obvious evidence that our present teaching practices, which we proclaim we want to protect from "dehumanizing science," have succeeded most notably in producing a population that assiduously avoids literature because it has been taught to detest it while in school.

So let us start with two propositions that, I hope, describe the real-world state of affairs. *First, the way the schools are now constituted, it is neither equitable nor profitable to try to hold any one class of people accountable for either the successes or failures of the educational system. Second, since teachers are the ones in face to face contact with students, teachers are the ones who ultimately must be held personally and collectively accountable for seeing that students learn.* Therefore, it follows that what needs to be done is to find ways to restructure schools so that teachers may reasonably be held responsible for seeing that all clinically normal students are able to read and write with at least minimal competence.

If there is anything that we in education are consummately skillful at, it is projecting the blame for educational failure. Educators at any level can explain on the instant why children of particular races, social classes, and parentages cannot acquire the minimum school skills. Sixty years ago, reputable ivy league psychologists were giving aid and comfort to the schools by providing scientific arguments for the inherent intellectual inferiority of Italian and eastern European children. Today, Arthur Jensen and his followers are doing schools the same service in regard to black children. And well-meaning sociologists, psychologists, and even nutritionists are grinding out studies of environmental and familial factors which explain the inability of disadvantaged children to learn in schools.

But this won't do any longer. There is growing impatience with the once-respectable strategy of holding students and their parents accountable for the institutional failing of the schools. But I am afraid that the accountability movement in its currently most popular form is an attempt by the managers of educational institutions to shift the blame off themselves and put it on the backs of individual classroom teachers, and that won't do either. It is equally intolerable to hold teachers accountable for the shortcomings of a school system that teachers have had as little part in structuring as the child has had in his choice of parents.

Let us talk about this on the level of simple literacy, since the most basic reason for the school's existence is to teach young people how to read and write. I am not speaking of appreciating literary masterpieces or of developing a good prose style. I am speaking of the degree of literacy necessary to survive as a free person in American society — about reading well enough to use the want ads, to drive on a superhighway, to comprehend a retail contract, to follow a technical manual, to pass a civil service test, or to qualify for an apprenticeship program. And I am speaking of writing well enough to draft a job application, to hold an office job or a supervisory position, to write a letter of complaint to the proper party when one has been cheated or exploited.

Without such skills one is doomed. Yet many of our schools, after nine or ten years of having custody of students, turn out many of them as functional illiterates — and in some schools the proportions of such failures reach 40 or 50 or 60 percent.

We can no longer afford to succumb to the temptation to blame our own failure on one another or on forces outside the school. Not at these prices, we can't — these prices in dollars and in human misery and in social turmoil. The school as an institution must first of all be held accountable. We must have the courage to realize that respectable excuses for failure are no substitutes for finding ways to serve the children who come to us.

As teachers, our accountability must not be primarily to administrators or supervisors or boards of education or to politicians. It must be to the children, and, through them, to the future. We must be willing, in that case, to think of the public schools themselves — and of laws, disciplines, and organizations associated with them — as temporary, *ad hoc*, disposable creations that should be dispensed with at any time it becomes apparent that they are humanly and structurally inadequate to discharge the basic tasks for which they were instituted. In many communities, the time for that sort of accounting has come.

For in the present constitution of the public schools, it is simply absurd to recommend judging a teacher on the results of his work, as if he were a free professional. As Albert Shanker, head of the New York City teachers union, recently observed:

> [Teachers] are the victims . . . of a system that has seen 8,000 new teachers move into New York . . . every year for the past twenty years. These new teachers, drawn from many different colleges and universities, are a remarkably diverse group: Catholics and Protestants, Jews and nonbelievers, blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives. Yet, after four weeks of teaching in New York City it is almost impossible to

> distinguish the newcomers from those they replaced. Which leads to an obvious conclusion: . . . the overwhelming majority of teachers do what the school as a system compels them to do.

Shanker, for obvious, self-interested reasons, draws back from the equally obvious conclusion that if what the system compels teachers to do is manifestly wrong for students, and even subversive of the purposes for which the system was established, then the system should be abolished forthwith. And what possible justification can there be for adding another level of managers — the accountability experts — to that system, thereby diverting more scarce dollars from classroom instruction, when, under the circumstances, about all the experts can do is to devise ways for measuring the degrees of failure of teachers compelled to behave in self-defeating ways?

Similar questions must be asked about the institutions that prepare the teachers for the public schools. For, apparently, teacher training programs have remarkably little effect upon the classroom behavior of teachers. And, apparently, these institutions certify an excessive number of weak-spined or unmotivated people who all too easily can be coerced into doing what the system compels them to do.

The people who advocate the restructuring of the present school system into small, locally-controlled school districts seem to me to be on the right track. These districts should be small enough that teachers can know the students and be accessible to their parents. And they should be so administered that teachers are given the final responsibility for all professional decisions. With teachers being given complete academic freedom, and being collectively responsible for deciding on matters of curriculum, course content, staffing patterns, instructional approaches, in-service training, and the hiring of new staff members, they could legitimately be held accountable — to their students, their colleagues, and the students' parents.

There are, of course, as those with a stake in the status quo are quick to point out, tremendous problems associated with the community school concept, especially in the areas of political involvement and public interference in what should legitimately be professional decisions. But hardly any conceivable state of affairs could be worse than what now exists. And there are other alternatives, with which people must be given the opportunity to experiment. The goal, in any case, should be to discover arrangements in which the teachers are ultimately responsible for the educational process, so that they can legitimately be held responsible for

the outcomes of their efforts. And in which they are held accountable to the students and their parents, not to some higher authority. Such a teacher-run school would be accountable to its funding authority only for demonstrating it is meeting the wishes of its clients and handling its funds in a legal manner.

Efforts of educational reformers and systems experts, I am suggesting, should be directed less toward rationalizing and patching up failed structures, less toward attempting to bypass teachers, and much more toward devising a variety of institutional structures within which teachers have the freedom and the resources to perform as they think best in the particular situation. Rather than more regulation, prescription, and programming, we need to provide open environments within which teachers can flourish or fail according to their talents in producing results. We need to worry a great deal less about objectified, standardized measures of output, and a great deal more about keeping track of how students and their parents feel about what is happening to the students in the schools.

But, to return to the question of accountability for basic literacy in the schools as they now exist. Despite everything I have already said, it is legitimate to insist that everyone in a school is accountable for helping children learn to read and write at an acceptable level.

Where this is not the case, everyone is culpable. Teachers of other subjects who insist that reading and writing is the English teacher's job, and English teachers who find the teaching of reading beneath their dignity ("They should have been taught to read down below; *I* teach literature."), are equally engaging in a grisly charade when they pretend to be teaching anything at all to students who cannot read. And the same goes for administrators who insist on everyone's being subjected to the prescribed subjects at the prescribed time. And it goes for colleges of education that find everything more interesting than the teaching of reading. (A recent survey of 850 colleges found that only 94 required teacher candidates to take more than three hours of reading, while 305 required more than three hours in religion.)

Without waiting for the dissolution and reform of our present educational system, we can begin to insist that everyone must be a reading teacher, and that no student who cannot yet read at the appropriate level should be subjected to the humiliation of being made to pretend to discuss Shakespeare or the American Revolution or the exports of Bolivia. For that much at least, we are all accountable to our consciences.